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Schiff on Carter

David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (London: Eulenberg Books, 1983), £22.50

Writing a comprehensive survey of a living composer's work is problematical. There are two possible approaches: to write in isolation from the composer, or to work in collaboration with him. The first approach is the safer in that the author can be objectively critical, though he must be keenly perceptive and analytically well informed if the text is to be anything more than a mere description of what one can already hear in the music. It will usually be the case that a writer adopting the second approach will be committed, if not devoted, to the composer and his work, and therefore probably unable to be truly 'critical' of his subject; but the collaborative method often yields much valuable source material and some fascinating anecdotes. David Schiff's book on Elliott Carter falls uneasily into the latter category, though one would wish that it had rather more of the objectivity and analytical rigour of the former.

In the foreword Schiff sets out the plan of the book 'as a guide', and states that his aim is to view the music 'from the perspective of the composer's development and also to relate Carter's compositional technique to those non-musical arts with which he has been deeply involved' (p.ix). Schiff spent three years as a composition student with Carter at the Juilliard School and has therefore, 'been privileged . . . to know the man, and to be in contact with the on-the-spot workings of his musical mind' (p.ix); he was also fortunate in being next door to the library at Lincoln Center where Carter has deposited all his manuscripts, sketches, analytical charts, letters, and documents. Yet a particularly unusual sentence here leads one to certain conclusions: 'It is *my* perspective on Carter's music. Where the composer and I have occasionally differed I have indicated his viewpoint.' (p.ix) This suggests that Carter read the book before publication; if we also take into account the fact that the author is a pupil and friend of the composer, then we may safely assume it to be a definitive discussion of the composer's work. It is also, interestingly, the first book about Carter not written by Carter himself. While this is an adequate book, handsomely produced with many music examples, charts, and photographs, it is a disappointing book in that it does not live up either to its size (and at 371 pages, with coverage of every work including unpublished juvenilia, and a comprehensive bibliography and discography, it is much more than a 'guide') or to the almost unlimited scope for personal contacts open to the author—not only with the composer himself, but with such close colleagues as Charles Rosen and the late Paul Jacobs, and painters and poets living in New York.

Schiff's book is organised in an intelligent way, with a short opening chapter entitled 'An Overview: Family, Education, Creative Method', followed by two useful chapters, 'Musical Time: Rhythm and Form' and 'Musical Space: Texture and Harmony', which explain and summarise fundamental techniques and concepts. The remaining body of the book is divided into six chapters that work chronologically through Carter's entire output up to the solo piano work *Night Fantasies* of 1980.

Schiff draws extensively on the two Carter source works *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds* and *The Writings of Elliott Carter*,[1] and rightly takes them as his departure point. Carter's own writing is that of an immensely cultured man, concerned with communicating as clearly as possible the complexity of his musical ideas. Where Carter discusses his compositional technique he gives a description of the basic material (often in chart form, which Schiff has reproduced directly) and then explains why and how he makes this into music. While Schiff's background information is interesting, his analyses of the music are simply descriptions of events. In an article from 1976 Carter asks the following questions:

> How are events presented, carried on, and accompanied? What kind of changes can previously presented events undergo while maintaining some element of identity? and, How can all this be used to express compelling aspects of experience to the listener?[2]

These are fundamental concepts which Schiff only begins to illuminate. In *Flawed Words* Carter writes, 'Any analysis of music has to be the analysis of the means by which a piece makes its expressive point and produces the impression one has of it.'[3] It is necessary to explain the details of a language and also to describe the gestures within a piece, but what is most interesting, indeed vital to the understanding of new music is the means by which the language becomes the gesture and therefore creates the 'impression' of the music. Two musicians who have been closely linked with Carter have also had much to say about analysis. According to Charles Rosen,

> The analytical approach is the composer's, in the sense that it attempts to reveal about the music what could be of use to another composer. What, in fact, could be useful to him is what gives the listener pleasure, what makes it music, in fact.[4]

Richard Franko Goldman has said of some analyses that they 'remind one of a meticulous description of all the parts of an automobile engine, [which] neglects to mention that gasoline is used to make it go'.[5]

What seems to me most irritatingly to represent Schiff's lack of analytical grasp is the way in which he constantly compares moments in Carter's music to works from the past: for example, of *Heart not so heavy as mine* he says, 'Carter superimposes on a sustained tolling motif (suggestive of the *Dies Irae* or of Brahms Op.118 no.6) fragments of a livelier music' (p.81) and of *Pocahontas*, 'The opening, explosive material, however, sounds rather like Milhaud and the calmer music starts out very much like Hindemith, before it begins to fade away.' (p.98) In explaining compositional procedures he frustratingly takes us only as far as generalisations; such phrases as 'also plays a significant role in the work' (p.137, on the subject of semitonal relationships in the Cello Sonata), and 'implies a polyrhythmic pattern that is exploited here in numerous ways' (p.150, of *Canaries* from Eight Pieces for Timpani) are typical.

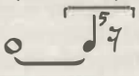
The Double Concerto is a work that a university student might encounter during his 20th-century course; together with the Second Quartet and Concerto for Orchestra, it perhaps constitutes the best of Carter's music. After looking in the composer's own writings[6] and finding little real technical illumination, apart from some charts of pitches and rhythmic ratios, the student would turn to Schiff. Unfortunately, apart from lengthy discussions of the literary background and descriptions of larger-scale events, he would discover only the same charts, with not much more explanation, and (rather more worryingly) some tricky factual ambiguities.

For example, why is it necessary for Schiff to

confuse matters (p.210) by calling the harpsichord's all-interval tetrachord, which has always been 0,1,3,7 (and which, together with the piano's all-interval tetrachord 0,1,4,6, forms the generating pitch material of the piece), 0,4,6,7 (a different ordering—in fact a reversal—of the intervals)? Chart 2 (p.65) shows a pitch matrix developed from the two tetrachords in four- and eight-note versions; Chart 4*a* (p.67) shows ten intervals linked to tempos but in different transpositions from those pitches in Chart 2. In Chart 2 the reference pitch for the different versions of the sets is *f'* (that is, 0 = F rather than C). Is F a structurally important note? It is unlikely, but it would have been clearer simply to transpose Carter's original chart either to C or to some forms actually used in the piece.

A more serious problem arises from the 'primal' or 'tonic' chord of the work. On page 66 Schiff tells us that the Double Concerto uses a 12-note primal chord, which is 'repeated, untransposed, throughout much of the work. It thereby becomes the central harmonic structure of the Concerto, as well as the focus of its harmonic motion—in short, a twelve-note tonic chord.' On page 211 he says 'In addition to the recurrent harmonic sonority of the two all-interval four-note chords, a sixteen-note chord shown in the interval chart appears quite frequently as an all-interval "tonic".' We now have three primal collections, one of eight, one of 12, and one of 16 notes (the 12-note collection is difficult to extract from the charts). How do these three relate? The 12-note collection is fixed and untransposable; which pitches from the 16 are the 12? Does the 16-note collection contain the other two? Are they all distinct? And do they have structurally different functions?

In his discussion of Carter's method of organising rhythm by associating pulse with interval, Schiff gives the composer's information on the ratio of whole numbers and reciprocals, and a poorly explained quotation from Carter's alternative notation (on five staves) of the piano cadenza at bars 567-70.[7] He could easily and usefully have linked the rhythmic scheme from Chart 4*a* to this example by explaining the ratios, giving the metronomic pulses, and annotating the piano part accordingly. For example, the right hand's major 7th (E flat–D) has the duration



which is metronome 21⅞ at crotchet = 105, the basic pulse of the work. Similarly bars 44-6 are given in Carter's rhythmic scheme (see Chart 20, p.214), whereas it would have been better to show the pages from the score annotated with the coming together of the different metronomic pulses.

I have been hard on this volume not because it is any worse than other composer monographs (in fact it is considerably better than most being produced today) but because I believe that Carter deserves, if not demands, a critique equal to his achievement. He has developed a style in which he has codified and systematised a free atonal language, attaining harmonic and motivic unity by means of set theoretic procedures; he has created an equally 'atonal' and controlled rhythmic language in which metronomic pulses are associated with intervals. His mode of musical expression overcomes the unwieldiness of much serial writing by its flexibility and scope, while still unifying harmony and rhythm in an intellectually satisfying way. Carter's work merits just as much theoretical attention as has been given to that of Schoenberg and Webern.

One of the problems of contemporary musicological writing is its intellectual poverty, which is so acute that the historical discipline, in particular, hardly rises above the level of stamp collecting. Now that David Schiff has done the factual groundwork, it is for someone else (preferably someone with the critical faculties of a George Steiner or a Charles Rosen) to talk about the music.

1 Allen Edwards, *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: a Conversation with Elliott Carter* (New York: Norton, 1971); Kurt Stone and Else Stone, eds., *The Writings of Elliott Carter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

2 'Music and the Time Screen', *Current Thought in Musicology*, ed. John W. Grubbs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); repr. in *The Writings of Elliott Carter*, pp.343-65.

3 *Flawed Words*, p.118.

4 Charles Rosen, 'The Proper Study of Music', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol.1, no.1 (1962), p.87.

5 Richard Franko Goldman, *Selected Essays and Reviews, 1948-1968*, ed. Dorothy Klotzmann, ISAM Monographs, no.13 (New York: Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 1980), p.157.

6 'The Orchestral Composer's Point of View', *The Composer's Point of View: Essays on Twentieth-century Music by those who Wrote it*, ed. R. S. Hines (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 39-61; repr. in *The Writings of Elliott Carter*, pp.282-300.

7 Schiff's Example 85, p.211, quoted from the score, p.132.